

*Gleaner*

1989



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# 1989

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# From the Editor

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*Bradley T. Braun*

As Editor, it was inevitable that I face the task of writing an introduction to the 1989 Delaware Valley College Gleaner. Lacking inspiration I turned, in the eternal spirit of literature, and in hopes of finding some erudite guidance to aid me in the discharge of my editorial duty, to such memorable introductions as Harlan Ellison's to *Dangerous Visions Two* and Carl Sagan's to Stephen W. Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Several blissful hours later I was dismayed to realize that I was no closer to writing an introduction than when I had begun.

Recognizing that if I did not think of something soon my only alternative would be to write a thank you listing those persons involved, both directly and indirectly, in the production of the Gleaner, thereby compelled, I turned to yet another long-standing literary tradition: larceny, more often referred to as the use of quotations by those with the habit of such thievery. So it is with the words of Emerson that I commend your spirit when reading these pages: "I am quite ready to be charmed, but I shall not make-believe I am charmed."

And so it would seem that I have written my introduction after all; if I have failed to do it well, at least I am consoled by the knowledge that, if they are at all like me, in their desire to get to the business at hand, most did not stop to read this at all.



*Dr. Richard Ziemer*



*Mr. Bradley T. Braun*




*Mr. Edward O'Brien*

# Gleaner

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# Abe

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*Bradley T. Braun*

It had been a long day for Abe Hamlish. With a sigh indicating another job well done, he leaned back from his computer terminal. "At least with this assignment I can work at home," he thought as he lit one of the stogies forbidden him at the office.

He heard sobbing coming from the bedroom. "Anne must have had another nightmare," he mused, beginning to get up from his desk.

"He raped me," Abe heard Anne saying in the other room.

"It was only a dream, honey," he called to her. "Go back to bed, I'll be in in a minute. I'm done for the night."

As Abe entered the tidy living room of their small, one bedroom apartment he realized something was not right. Anne was talking on the telephone. Her nightgown was torn. He took a involuntary step backwards when he saw her steadily pointing a knife toward his chest from across the room.

"Get away from me!" she screamed. "Get away, or so help me I'll kill you."

Abe backed away in confusion as Anne began brandishing the knife wildly in one hand, the telephone still held firmly in the other.

"Who is on the 'phone?" he asked dumbly, not knowing what else to say.

"The police! And they're coming to get you. I don't know why you did this to me, but I'm not going to let you get away with it," her words trailed off in an almost unintelligible screech.

Abe balked. He did not know what was going on, but things were certainly out of hand. He decided on another tact.

"Look honey, I didn't do anything to you. It was just a dream. Like before, only worse. Calm down, it'll be alright." Abe, gaining confidence, hesitantly stepped towards her.

"No it won't." Anne motioned with the knife, causing Abe to retreat. "I want you out of here, in jail. And the police will find your friend too. I'll be sure of it."

"My friend?" Abe asked. Now he was really concerned. "Anne is having a breakdown," he thought. "I should have seen it coming."

"Yes, your friend," Anne responded savagely. "The fat one. Don't try to tell me I imagined him too. How could you let such a a..a monster touch me?" she accused.

With horror, Abe realized what was wrong. "Not only now," he thought, "but all her nightmares. They began when I started working at home. It's the work. I knew it was going too well to be true. Somehow, it's affected Anne."

When the police came, Abe went along peacefully, knowing that when the physician's report was filed it would prove that Anne had not been raped. It would be hard on her, he knew, to realize the whole event never occurred. Perhaps harder still to get her to trust him again. But he could make it work, if only he could move her away from his work.

In less than twelve hours, the physician's report on Anne Czalochi was filed.

Its results were undeniably conclusive.

Anne Czalochi had been raped by two men.

Alone in his cell, Abe Hamlish wondered about his sanity.



## All and All

---

*Kimberly Anderson*

It's been fun...

We've laughed and  
we've cried...

It's been fun...

Sometimes a lot of  
hard work  
other times we chilled...

We've checked out  
the fellows

and we've kicked some  
tough games...

But all and all

it's been fun.

## Untitled #3

---

*Kimberly Anderson*

So I'm only 17, is that so bad... I feel like all of my life I've tried my best to please you... Now I'm ready to fly like an eagle... Soaring through the sky with wings nice and widespread... With a look and feeling of determination... I've made a place in this world for myself and I will stand my GROUND.

# Treasure Acres

---

*Dr. Richard C. Ziemer*

A trophy left Del Val today;  
Just plucked himself  
From his freshman shelf  
And intently drove away.

Was I sick!

Had I been abrasive? Harsh? Unattending?  
Not discerning what he needed  
That he unclustered himself  
From those future Who's Who's?  
Was a compound missing  
From the core of alloys that we offer  
That he became an un-alumnied Aggie?

The next day he was back in place  
Among the other freshman trophies.

Was I relived! Then I thought:

Of these trophies  
We're the caretakers and benefactors  
Not the owners.  
They come  
And grace this place,  
Improve their basic temper;  
They're burnished  
By the academic fire  
That hones their wit  
And guides their skill.

And then they make their niche in time and space  
As we boast and brag  
That for a few four years  
They garnished our shelves  
With that pliable, optimistic mettle—

That exciting naivete, whose patina  
Matures before our very eyes.

# My Secret Love

---

*C. J. Bannan*

Nothing is forbidden  
when it is hidden  
deep inside the soul.  
A burning ash,  
with a core of ice  
flashes a winning smile . . .  
but you are the constant warmth  
ensconcing my body in light.  
Give just once breath from you to me,  
I am drowning in the blue sea,  
the windows with which  
you don't notice me.  
I fall helplessly  
sliding down  
the smooth bronze of your arm  
landing at your feet,  
at your will.  
Kill me with your words,  
love me with your mouth,  
free me with your love.  
Surely one kiss would cure  
this infinite love,  
or inspire art and song.  
If you were carved of marble,  
the elements would caress  
and soothe your entirety.  
The sun would beat you  
mercilessly,  
fading and burning you.  
The moon would spotlight you,  
so still and lovely in the dark,  
a blanket of death,  
you are the warm flesh,  
a symphony of gold  
and precious jewels of blue,  
and I want nothing more  
than to tell you  
how very much  
I love you.

# Reflections on China and America

---

*Nathaniel O. Wallace*

## I

An account of why many firsthand reports of China tend to be unfavorable could become endless, but I can summarize by saying that the causes can be separated into two broad categories. There are those that spring from what we bring to the situation and those that arise from the situation itself. To illustrate how these two kinds of factors can work together, I need only mention how a resident of New York or Philadelphia, accustomed to a high degree of efficiency, commodities in abundance and varied daily activities, becomes irritated when confronted with the relative inefficiency and scarcity of China. The need to arrive at clear and easy generalizations is frustrated by the inaccessibility and contradictory nature of information one gathers in a land proverbial for its ambience of mystery. This frustration often becomes anger that is resolved by one's contriving a consistent and negative view of China. Since the general defects of modern China have been dealt with in various articles and monographs, it is useful to give further attention to the attitudes and assumptions of foreign observers. I thus wish to unpack some of the cultural baggage a visitor from abroad might bring to China.

Especially relevant for Americans (although citizens from any of the industrialized countries are often similarly predisposed) is the fact that we as a nation are over-stimulated, conditioned to a multitude of diversions, many of them audio-visual and electronic. The intensity of our amusements, whether in the form of cinema, radio, tape recordings, television or video games, is hardly matched by the tameness of Chinese counterparts, where they exist at all. One who is fond of rock music immediately embarks on a meager diet of such entertainment in China. In addition to the diversions one ordinarily seeks, there are those that our culture offers in the form of background busyness, whether we ask for them at every moment or not. The repetition of commercials on television and radio, flashing neon lights, high-speed traffic, and other daily symptoms of the convenience or inconvenience of urban life are greatly diminished in rapidity and quantity here. The series of reforms one often hears about is moving China toward a market economy by minute degrees. Small changes often become news because they are atypical but seem to represent a new trend. Struck by the slow pace of life and infrequency of shopping areas, flashing signs and other paraphernalia associated with a capitalist society, Americans sometimes complain of sensory deprivation after living in China for a while.

Peking, with its single-storey or low-rise buildings and its scattered market districts, strikes many visitors as only a center of population. "Where's the city?" they ask, when they are already downtown. Japanese residents often have a similar response and remark that Peking is like being "in the country." For these reasons, a number of foreigners prefer Shanghai, which is more compact and has a somewhat more active consumer economy than does Peking.

The over-stimulated find themselves subject to more than the usual share of boredom that afflicts many foreigners in China. The beauties of China tend to be quieter and less assertive than its annoyances. The majesty of its traditional calligraphy and painting, the charm and variety of its folk art, the flow of centuries-old patterns of life along narrow alleys, and the vitality of its people can fail to impress. Just as the student of Chinese language must learn to distinguish between minute differences of pitch and enunciation, the observer of the nation and its culture faces audio-visual configurations that are subtle as well as unfamiliar. The hawking calls of peddlers, the jangle of bells on donkeys or oxen, or the still commentary of a landscape inscribed with Buddhist monuments are useless treasures for anyone seriously addicted to the rhythm and movement of post-modern urban society.

## II

Chinese and American pragmatism grow hauntingly similar if one considers a special aspect of that spirit in each culture. In America, pragmatism has almost always carried with it an aura of innovation that is perhaps well summed up in the word "gumption." The term indicates an individual's ability to continue battling for existence in spite of unfavorable conditions; this combative attitude also implies that one willingly accepts risk or social disfavor if success seems attainable. The Wright brothers exemplify gumption; with cloth stretched over a wooden frame, they made a laughable invention into the basis of a revolution in technology. From the time when the thirteen colonies fought for independence against the strongest military power of the age, to the woolly days of the westward migrations and settlements, to the Berlin airlift, and to contemporary innovations of door-to-door pizza peddlers and supra-atmospheric defense systems, Americans have sought the practical and have often succeeded at what at first inspection would appear to be highly impractical or at best undesirable. Similarly, the Chinese, especially within the past few decades, have cultivated the same spirit and even have a name for it. "Zì lì gēng shēng," translated as "regeneration" or "self-reliance in creating change," even sounds suspiciously like

“gumption.” From the building of the Great Wall onward, the Chinese have periodically labored to achieve success out of apparently unworthy schemes. New China is itself such a scheme that some critics argue has failed. The Great Leap Forward, the importation of thousands of “Foreign Experts” in scores of specialities, the “one family-one child” policy, and today’s economic experiments all show this enterprising spirit. The Chinese have not feared to undertake ambitious and risky schemes if the pay-off has appeared enticing. Because the overall state of development of China is so overtly different from that of America at present, Chinese gumption manifests itself in ways that seem comic to many observers.



# Broken Dreams

---

*Darren Alles*

A way of life that I recall  
Working the land to fill some hungry needs  
Home of red barns and green fields  
Years of dreaming and days of long hard work

New faces and attitudes done come around  
Other farms took on a different shape and style  
A concrete town surrounded me  
Cars and houses soon replaced that dream

I miss old friends that I once had  
Times have changed leaving an empty feeling  
Mountain Laurel, Grouse, and good clean air  
Miles away from the city once called home

I'm tired of thinking and fooling around  
There's people laughing and looking down on me  
A bird named Ronnie is a guiding light  
Sing me a song when I'm feeling blue  
Oh. but now...

Broken Dreams

I don't know  
Which path to take  
But I must keep on travellin'  
One day I'll find my place in the sun

## **Life**

---

*Angela Mazaika*

Life is a rainstorm,  
Springtime,  
A flower blossoming,  
A newborn baby,  
Waking up in the morning  
To see the dawn of a new day.

## **A Buttercup**

---

*Angela Mazaika*

A buttercup is God's creation,  
The beginning of summer,  
natural beauty,  
delicately shiny and fragile,  
Yellow.



## **...Thoughts of Justin...**

---

*Maggie Ellis*

Dearest Justin, Love's child so sweet  
When at first our paths did meet  
You showed me the life of a child complete  
And me at 40 and you at 4  
Your childhood dreams we did explore  
It seems unfair that you had to leave  
And reflecting the memories of you I grieve  
But perhaps you are the lucky little guy  
Who's coloring the clouds for God in the sky

# The Simple Things

---

*Christian Tice*

Do we forget the simple things  
That make our lives worthwhile?  
The grace of a flowing tear,  
The tenderness of a smile.

We tend to dwell on the problems  
That each day seems to bring.  
Is there nothing better to recall;  
Have we forgotten everything?

Stop now and remember  
Some memories you've stored away,  
Something worth recalling  
To make a better day.

# Bear Hunt in Northeastern Pennsylvania

---

*Bodie Knapp*

The most interesting day in my life is easily distinguishable from all the rest. It was that day that I went to hunt the bear that had been invading the sheep pasture on a weekly basis. This hunt was not to be a sporting event; we had a job to do. The hunting party consisted of my brother, father, uncle and myself. Here only one animal would fill the order of the day, the bear. This one animal was the smartest, most cunning, and fiercest animal in the woods. At the beginning of the quest I did not realize this, but by the end it was very obvious. By studying his tracks and the sightings that we had observed, we were able to get a general idea of where he was spending the bulk of his time.

We walked into the snow-covered woods in a line formation. We walked for what seemed like hours, with only the sounds of the cheerful Chickadees; out on even the worse days. I was only thirteen years old and frightened; having seen what the bear had done to our champion ram, who was much stronger than me. I was quite scared. I walked on, the tension building inside me. Despite the frigid wind, I was warm as I walked through the frosty wilderness.

Finally I heard the crack of a shot in the wintery air. I found a good stump to rest on and strained every sense that I had to pick out the brute that I searched for. Seconds seemed like hours, and every little whisper of sound spun my imagination through all sorts of images. Finally I spotted the bruin much closer, and in the opposite direction from what I had expected. I laid my sights on him and squeezed off my shot only to have the bear bite at his hip and lunge in my direction, confused by all that was happening. I hastily ejected the shell in preparation for a second shot. My second shot took him in the shoulder and he kept on coming my way, apparently under the illusion that the marksman was behind him. At this point I cracked under pressure by jamming the third round in the chamber. My fingers seemed to work with decreasing proficiency as the beast closed in. Somewhere in the mass confusion I heard a gun shot and looked up to see my father standing on the left, rifle in hand, and the bear sprawled on the ground.

Relieved, I moved closer to see this monstrous creature that had slaughtered all those sheep. When I was less than five yards away, the bear revived and began to get up. I looked back to see that jammed and useless rifle leaning against a tree. As a last resort I pulled out the small twenty-two caliber pistol that I had used in the morning to dispatch a raccoon on my trapping line. I bore down with the bead on his forehead, now no more than ten feet away, and pulled the trigger.

He toppled forward with his momentum and ceased to move. I could clearly see the mark of my bullet and knew this time he would not recover. Despite the reputation of this brute, I was almost sorry that I had ended his life. The snow around him turned crimson, and I realized that he was only trying to live just like anyone else.

## Experience and Wisdom

---

*Morris Bradham*

Experience Was the Master Teacher...  
His Ways Were Hard & Rough...  
Wisdom Stood Back, To Watch The  
Procession...And Thought to Watch  
Was Experience Enough...

## Choices

---

*Morris Bradham*

Before you take a Drug or Drink...  
it's a choice, Take time to think...

Choices start in the Mind...  
and settle in the Heart...  
They're easy to find...  
And hard to start...

Choices Are Made By the young  
& Old...The Wrong Ones Determine  
The Value of your soul...

The Greatest Choice A Recovering  
Addict Can Make...  
is When He or She Cry  
Precious Lord, My Hand, Please  
Take...

## Sunday Silence

---

*Brian S. Benner*

Asleep on the sofa,  
silently dreaming in a world far from my own.  
I watch over and love,  
but how can you know?  
Your familiar face,  
with hair spilling over your forehead at the  
end of the mountainous range of blanket.  
Its peaks and valleys  
rising and falling gently with your breath,  
covering all but life.

Here in the quiet house,  
where all I hear are the pipes speaking freely,  
I watch over and hope somehow to understand.  
I wonder, if ever I'll speak as freely as the  
pipes and say all I need to say.  
And like the listening wood,  
hear all I need to know . . . from you.

I want the knowing comfort, the peace of  
understanding;  
yet here we are together, in the dim light filtering  
through closed curtains.  
In silence . . . an arm's length apart.  
In our own words, ever so rarely knowing  
the others.

# Losing Life's Links

---

*Dr. Richard C. Ziemer*

Whenever the telephone would ring late at night at our house in Quakertown, Pennsylvania I thought that my parents were calling from Sandy, Oregon, and the older my grandparents and parents became, I thought the calls portended bad news. My sketchy account of Ziemer necrology included the loss of my great-grandfather who died at his son's home (my grandfather's) in 1943, the loss of my grandfather, who died at his son's home (my dad's) in 1980 and the next logical mortal event – that of my father – who started to die at his own house.

When David called me from Wyoming, November 16, 1985, I was reading at home that sunny afternoon, and was totally unprepared for the shock, “Dad had a stroke this morning. He is in serious condition; things look bad for him.” His two predecessors had lived 87 and 90 years, and here was Dad Ziemer at age 73 in a hospital intensive care unit, and soon to be moved to a nursing home.

After teaching the next week and checking with two brothers who had flown out to be by his side, I left before the Thanksgiving break. My “red eye” flight did not hold the same expectation that it held earlier that summer when we visited both parents. Philadelphia – Houston-Portland brought me face to face, at 6:00 a.m. with Dad's brother, who took me from the airport to his place. Nine inches of snow had fallen, roads were packed with ice, as Oregon uses no salt, and the temperatures were below freezing much of the time.

When Mom and brother Robert came to get me, I was ready to ride in the old Ford, for I had on work clothes and thick work boots. But as Robert led the way to the elevator of the nursing home, got off at the second floor, and walked directly into the room of a man that I did not recognize and said “Hi, Daddy,” my heart sank. Because Robert had to return to Tennessee the next day, we spent time talking with/to a paralyzed “Paul Bunyan” whose only response was to wince and cry, and who could move only his feet; we tried to make him comfortable and share what he had meant to us. Seeing this once self-sufficient man now sustained by food through a NG tube was anomalous. Back at the farm later that day we discussed “What if's” – what if Dad comes through and is confined to a wheelchair? What if he does not make it through this? Mom's life would change dramatically in either case, as had the lives of many of those other pioneer women along that rural Oregon road who became widows.

After Robert left, it was Mom, I, and a niece who visited, kept vigil, wished for a miracle, but found none. After talking with three physicians – one hopeful, the others not at all – and after telling Mom,



“It looks as if we’re going to lose Dad,” I slipped outside in heavy wraps to have a personal consultation with the Great Physician. His office was an air-conditioned 20 degrees F, His carpet was 9” of snow and ice, His murals were 80’ cedar trees, His ceiling was studded with stars as if spread upon black velvet. I did not wait but went right into His presence with my broken heart and said, “I’m losing my dad, aren’t I? Please give him one more day.” The only celestial response that night came from the brilliant glow of a perfect full moon as I leaned against one of those trees and wept. I seemed to hear, “Richard, you’re not the only one losing someone; there’s your mom, your brothers, your Dad’s brothers and sisters, and the neighbors. Many other people will miss this man too; you cannot keep him forever; release him.” That pacified me, and Dad got one more day—Thanksgiving. Then the next morning at 11:10 as I stood by his bed massaging his shoulders and chest, trying to help him breathe, he drew a final breath, and there slipped away from me into eternity one of my two closest links to life—to humanity: Freddie E. Ziemer.



## Untitled

---

*Anonymous*

Stop yourself from falling off  
The tower you perceive as your own  
Question the thought that seeks your  
mind  
Then walk away without the  
answer

## Untitled

---

*Anonymous*

What thought death brings,  
As I conjure feelings inside.  
How I can ride with an Elder who  
    avoids death,  
While a young man that breathes no  
    Thought dies.  
What irony this is.

“The process is simple!” he told me.  
“Sing to avoid destruction of self.”  
I thought as I drove,  
the Elder’s words struck me as  
odd.

“He died yesterday,” was all she said.  
I remembered, trying to forget.  
How can he die, he was too young.  
Maybe not.

Feelings that are not clear to me,  
Confuse me but seem to fade.  
But once or twice in time, the  
feeling comes again.  
The feeling that cannot be avoided,  
A feeling that cannot be saved.  
A feeling known as death,  
And its victims all the same.

# Pandora's Box

---

*C. J. Bannan*

For years you've held  
precious thoughts and memories-  
in you I have etched  
pictures of my dreams,  
my hopes painted on your heart.  
Suddenly, as we grow  
the box in which I live  
deep in your heart  
has opened.  
Now I shall sit  
in utter silence,  
the loudest sound  
that you will ever hear,  
and nail shut Pandora's Box.

# A Fairy Tale

---

*Tony Palumbo*

One fine enchanted morning in the newly gentrified residential district of a busy downtown mystic kingdom, a young upwardly-mobile princess had her first encounter with the underclass, when she was accosted by a frog soliciting kisses from passersby.

Initially, the princess, a morally upright member of the urban aristocracy, was properly appalled by the flagrant indecency and overt kinkiness of the amphibian's proposition. Not only did this particular denizen of the marsh land tenements belong to an inferior socio-economic strata, he was also rather damp, green complexioned, and on welfare as well. In addition, the idea was patently unsanitary; inter-specific oral-epidermal contact could do anything from causing warts to transmitting AIDS. Obviously, his request constituted a serious transgression of social and evolutionary protocol.

However, while under ordinary circumstances the princess would most likely have summoned a member of the local constabulary and had the frog jailed for vagrancy, public lewdness and whatever other criminal charges could be contrived, on this morning she paused for a moment. Actually, she paused for several moments, which very nearly became a while. Indeed, after she felt that she had paused for enough moments, she began to consider the frog's proposal in something approaching earnest. While to the lay reader this may seem a change of heart somewhat inexplicable, closer inspection would reveal that the princess happened to be feeling unusually rebellious and especially sexually repressed that day, largely as a result of the domineering influences of her careerist step-mother. She was therefore unusually receptive to opportunities for unorthodox libidinal expression and/or class revolt. Thus, the only remaining obstacle was the princess' anxiety over the prospect of being confronted with the gross impropriety of her behavior by her analyst during a therapy session. The frog graciously assuaged her fears by explaining that upon completion of the act, a startling metamorphosis would transpire that would completely vindicate both parties.

The princess then kissed the frog.

One standard-issue startling metamorphosis then transpired.

In the moments that ensued, both participants in the recent event could do naught but stand in dumbstruck awe at the transformation that had just been wrought. Indeed, they both spent some time staring into each other's eyes, as if by doing so they might somehow come to terms with the new corporeal form that one of them had suddenly

assumed. However, it eventually occurred to each of them (individually and yet damn near simultaneously) that all that they could do was to exploit the situation to their fullest possible mutual advantage. Thus, with but a final deep look into each other's eyes and an exceedingly knowing roguish grin between them, the two frogs hopped with the utmost alacrity into the nearest swampy habitation, and commenced to build a new and happy life together, the species barrier having been at last boldly overcome.

EPILOGUE: Unfortunately, they did not live happily ever after. The incipient passion which the two amphibians had initially shared, almost incessant consummation of which served to characterize the first several weeks of their relationship, soon gave way to complacency, bordering on blatant boredom, as the two quickly began to exhaust the once-seemingly infinite capacity for novelty that the former princess' new body afforded her. Thus, less than two months after the princess' transmogrification, her erstwhile paramour was seen by reliable sources soliciting kisses from sexually frustrated nouveau riche pubescents on a city street-corner.

# I Am...Let Me Be

---

*C. J. Bannan*

Today I have been misunderstood.  
What is it to be misunderstood?  
If we all have interpretations  
of the world,  
so jaded by individual thoughts,  
is anyone ever understood?  
Understanding is merely  
an acceptance of ones capabilities.  
I am the source of all things,  
good and evil,  
light and dark.  
I am a tempest-  
Angry, and quick to destroy.  
I am the rain-  
soothing and monotonous,  
yet cold and relentless.  
I am alive,  
let me exist  
in my own euphoric creation.  
hatred pinkens my soul,  
as the world rapes me  
of my entirety.  
I am half,  
yet I am whole.  
I am a sapling void of roots,  
please don't let me die  
in the wind of your  
screams.  
Let me grow,  
I'll reach the sky  
when the sky meets me,  
and my outstretched arms.  
Your demands construct cages  
holding me near your heart,  
yet you hate me,  
and myself  
as much as you covet my love,  
and destroy my hope.

## Specimen

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*Brian S. Benner*

Floating...

with darkening skin,  
ten fingers, ten toes.

How did you end here?

Eyes closed, never to open on day nor night.  
Fingers clenched, never to hold anothers.

Who are you?

Upside down in fluid, in a glass jar.  
You should have been much more.

Where was your chance?

Given up for the chances of others,  
others who were responsible?  
They had a choice, you did not.

A victim of mistakes

...that of beginning  
...that of ending

A mistake – maybe

...are you?

## Obsession

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*Brian S. Benner*

Ever felt, not spoken

always known, but never understood.

Holding my soul captive

with unrelenting grasp.

Its power holds all-consuming control.

I allow, encourage,  
need its consumption of me.

Its presence always clawing,  
tearing at my intellect.

Knowing the impossibility,  
yet refusing to, unable to  
let go.

I ought to end it,

escape from it never to return.

Yet,

dreams of realized desire keep me  
from my freedom.



## Country House Party

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*Edward O'Brien Jr.*

On Christmas day of 1982 I went to a party at the country house of an old acquaintance. I remember it well, an enjoyable time that has troubled my spirit. Family and friends gathered at the stone house surrounded by its own secluded acreage. No other house could be seen. Four horses were stabled nearby, and five or six peacocks strutted about on the lawn. Around a table in the living room of the old house perhaps 25 of us were drinking champagne and chatting. The day was warm and overcast, making the room a little shadowy. Red candles were burning on the heavily-laden table. There was crystal and lace and a gaping, black-iron fireplace. Voices and laughter. Dogs.

These were country people; some were well-off, with land and horses. My original connection with the family had been writing an account of their big-game hunting and we had remained friendly. I could reminisce with six of them; the rest were strangers. But everyone was courteous and friendly, and with the bubbly flowing, relaxation and a spirit of bonhomie were general. In some ways, the occasion qualified as one of the "best" parties I ever attended. You know how it is; you joyously participate in some of a party, while some of it happens around you but not to you. Then after being detached for awhile, suddenly you are drawn in again.

A woman abruptly sat down across from me, a glass of champagne in one hand, and asked, brightly, "Do you have horses?" I had to say no, smiling at the unusual question.

Later, the elder daughter of the house, wearing a long black dress, and with flowing, ravenblack hair, told me that her brother, who lived too far away to come home that day, had recently become a Roman Catholic. I mistakenly asked her, "What do you think of that?" She gave me a concerned look. "Well, I think it's unfortunate!" This reply put me off somewhat, so forgetting my manners in that well-bred company, I asked her if she attended church. She shook her head.

Her short-haired sister, also dressed entirely in black, opposed yet more sternly her brother's turning to Rome. Out on the terrace, she said determinedly, "There's so much wrong with the Catholic Church." "What, for example?" She responded contemptuously, "They call God a father." "Oh, you're a feminist, then." She snapped back, "Certainly I'm a feminist: I'm a woman!" "Not all women are feminists, by any means," I countered. More sparring followed. We were getting nowhere. A royal peacock blew its brassy horn.

Still later, upon mentioning the subject of the erring brother to the younger son of the house, I was told that he became a Catholic

because he needed a strong discipline, like karate, which he had been “into.” The mother, our hostess, said with a quirky smile, “Whatever turns you on.” That someone might join a church because he thought her doctrines true did not occur to any member of the family, or at least remained unexpressed.

Under an oval portrait, someone pointed out some odd couples among the guests. I glanced over the softly-burning candles, and nodded. Then there appeared a 97-year-old sculptress accompanied by a strange figure who wore, even in the house, a tall red hat resembling a mitre. At one point, the mitred one, a middle-aged man, declaimed a “poem” to the company. It was time to go; after saying goodbye, I drove down through the dark cedar woods, and away.

What bothered me about this party and these people? They were not lacking in good breeding and friendliness. The family, whom I had known for years, was neither greedy, vulgar, snobbish or hypocritical. Of course, I knew little of their interior lives. The guests could only be considered by their behavior at the house; surely that is insufficient. But what little I knew or inferred disturbed me.

It was not so much what they were, as what, apparently, they were not. On the one hand, their values seemed to be good manners, common sense, a love of satisfying pleasures such as horsemanship and hunting, loyalty to old friends, kindness, and among some of them a certain worldly sophistication. And the family was politically liberal, despite outward appearances.

On the other hand, what was missing? Did any of them accept the Lord? To have openly brought up the subject around that candlelit board, with its *hors d'oeuvres* and glittering glasses of champagne, would have been an appalling and unforgivable crudity. Not that I wanted to; yet mixing quite willingly with them, I secretly held beliefs which they almost certainly were utterly indifferent to, if not contemptuous of. Consequently, a feeling of detachment, of being in a strange country, came over me. I have said they were kindly, and so they were, but if certain conversations had been taken to their logical divisions, then maybe they would have been upon me with icy stares or sarcastic words. Often, a believer simply has to remain silent, mindful of those words of John 15:19—

If you had been of the world, the world would love its own;  
but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you  
out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.

The day after the party, a Sunday, brought more sharply into focus this problem of being in the world but not of it. That morning I attended Mass. This liturgical experience was definitely on the other side of the river from the gathering in the stone house. Some of the



singing was awkward, the sermon overlong and rather bludgeoning, the people the sort you meet in shoe stores. Just people. No champagne, but consecrated wine. Instead of bubbles, the thick blood of religion, a scandal to the sophisticated. Yet, for a supernaturalist Christian, Church is where one has to be on Sunday morning. Not Wallace Stevens, but T.S. Eliot says it effectively: "It was, (you may say), satisfactory."

Thinking back to the party, I realized again the shocking chasm separating the supernaturalist believer from the unbeliever. What is reality to one, is fantasy to the other. On the deepest level of my being, I could say nothing to those people that would not bring a laugh, a frown, or glacial silence. The party was an image of the world. The stone house in the country remains to me a symbol of that humanism which, on the surface, seems attractive and humane, offering the best this world has from its refined, or jolly, hand. The main hall of the castle of humanism is sumptuous, warm, and cheery. Handsome men and lovely women reassure one another of their good sense, confirm one another in their avoidance of credulity and fanaticism. Everyone is mature and having a good time. It is flattering to one's self-image.

But dark passageways lead to side chambers and odd rooms below-stairs, where the humanist, cut adrift from faith, and relying on reason and experience alone, is apt to hearken to the piping of the whipporwills, and things will slide. He will listen to the call of what historian James Hitchcock has named "the imperial self," which asserts that whoever tries to tell you what to do is oppressing you. An unspoken premise of many prosperous Americans seems to be that you should get whatever you want and get it through your own efforts. Restraints are unhealthy.

Finally, it is the conversational style of secular humanists, even more than their hedonism, which is particularly painful to me. How often I have had to endure in silence the persiflage of educated, well-spoken secularists: that cold irreligious banter, that glib flippant mockery of things holy and pure. In those distressing moments, you fear it is a mistake to be in such gatherings at all.

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